

'Between the time that you are born and the time that a man goes into childcare...at what point is he influenced towards it?' The values, beliefs and reported practices/experiences of six male practitioners within early childhood education and care in England

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Introduction

Of the 213,000 practitioners currently working within early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England (Nutbrown, 2011: 5) 98% are women, whilst only 2% are men in diverse centre-based provision for children aged 0-5 years and only 1% within out-of-school provision (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010). The (limited) attention given to the imbalance of men and women in ECEC has most recently been considered within the context of wider issues relating to lack of clear qualification paths, the low status associated with ECEC work and thus the drive to increase the overall quality of ECEC. The Tickell review of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (2011:43) was the first of its kind to bring together the key components of the current ECEC workforce and recognised that the demographics of ECEC staff had a role to play in high quality ECEC work. Tickell commented 'young people with fewer academic qualifications, particularly girls, are the ones who tend to be steered towards careers in the sector'. It was advised that the Government collaborate with the Careers Profession Alliance in order to ensure that individuals are well-informed when making decisions that will determine their initial career path. Meanwhile, The Nutbrown Review of Early Education and Childcare Qualifications (Nutbrown, 2012) extended arguments outlined within the Tickell Review (2011) relating to workforce conditions and the central role these played in development of high-quality childcare. The Nutbrown review not only recognised the imbalance of male and female practitioners but also directly referred to the lack of male staff within the ECEC workforce in light of current workforce conditions. Nutbrown (2012: 50) suggested that 'establishing clearer career routes and improving the perceived status of the early years workforce will help more men see the value of the profession'. The need to improve the perceived status of ECEC work was also highlighted within the recent response to the Nutbrown review by the Department for Education (2013), this was linked to current qualification structures and the quality of ECEC.

However, whilst both the Tickell (2011) and Nutbrown (2012) reviews have highlighted the lack of men within the ECEC workforce, there has been minimal recognition of the men who *do* choose to work with young children. Furthermore, there has been a distinct lack of research that considers the values, beliefs and reported practices/experiences of male ECEC practitioners. Instead, emphasis has been upon men in ECEC as a minority and the barriers that deter them from entering the workforce.

This paper presents the second phase of a three-year PhD study into the policy-to-practice context of male professionals within ECEC in England. The first phase of the study was in the form of an online survey of 31 male practitioners. On completion of this, six life history interviews with men currently working in ECEC, formed the second phase of the study, followed by four elite interviews with individuals who have influenced policy and/or conducted research into the topic.

Research Aims

The aim of the life history interviews was to provide a snapshot of the values, beliefs and reported practices/experiences of a range of male professionals in ECEC. The focus for these interviews was on both the objective experiences and subjective perspectives of six male practitioners. Specifically, the interviews aimed to obtain personal accounts of practitioners' journey into the ECEC workforce.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's concept of habitus as constructed by 'internalised embodied social structures' (Bourdieu, 1989:18) has a dual purpose for this study. Firstly, examination of the ECEC habitus unearths the endurable patterns (such as the number of women working in the field) that help to explain why men remain under-represented within ECEC today. Furthermore, as the habitus is not fixed (Navarro, 2006) it provides the opportunity to uncover practices and events (in this instance, of male practitioners in ECEC) that challenge existing patterns. Secondly, Bourdieu's notion of habitus served as a useful tool for examining the life chances and experiences of men working within ECEC. In particular, the life history interviews identified critical incidents that led to the participation of participants within the field including parental occupations, opportunities for work experience during school and initial career choices. This study therefore provides an insight into the choices made, opportunities given and support provided for men who consider a career in ECEC (and thus also exposed missed opportunities for this).

Data sources, evidence and materials

Participants

Participants from the first phase of the PhD study (online survey) were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a life history interview, of which 24 agreed. Having approached all participants, a total of six agreed to participate in the life history interviews. The six participants were drawn from a range of professional groups and indeed different types of ECEC setting including children's centres and nurseries attached to state primary school. The table below provides an overview of the six participants.

| Participant | Age range (years) | Highest Qualification Achieved | Age of entry into ECEC (years) | Length of time working in ECEC (years) | Current Job Title | Working Hours Full-time (FT)/Part-time(PT) | Intention to continue work in ECEC |
|-------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 30-39 | NPQICL | 30-39 | 0-2 | Education Manager | FT | Unsure |
| 2 | 50-59 | Early Years Professional (EYP) | 40-49 | 6-10 | Owner of a nursery group | FT | Yes |
| 3 | 20-29 | No ECEC qualifications | 20-29 | 0-2 | Nursery Assistant | FT | No (but would consider a career in education) |
| 4 | Under 20 | NVQ Level 3 | Under 20 | 0-2 | Nursery Nurse | FT | Yes |
| 5 | 60+ | Masters | 20-29 | Over 20 | Self-Employed Early Years Consultant | FT | Yes |
| 6 | 30-39 | Masters | 20-29 | Over 20 | Children's Centre Area Manager | FT | Yes |

Table 1
Participants' Profiles

Materials

Whilst a semi-structured interview schedule was created for the interviews, there was a degree of flexibility to account for individualistic narratives and emerging themes to be explored further. Interview questions were generated from the micro, meso and macro contexts currently surrounding the topic. The schedule consisted of open questions in order to encourage an in-depth exploration into the key themes that emerged from the interview itself and allow for the natural development of conversation.

Analysis

Analysis was based within the first instance on a priori categories that emerged from the interview questions. At the second stage, emergent themes and common issues were uncovered from the data. Data analysis centered on the values, beliefs and reported practices/experiences of participants (which were reflected in the structure of the interview schedule). N-Vivo software was utilised in order to illuminate common themes and concepts that arose during the interviews.

Findings

Experiences

In order to explore early influences on the career choices of male professionals in ECEC, participants were initially asked about family occupations, particularly those of their parents. The results suggested that for all six participants there had been a family link to education and/or care in the past. In particular, female members of the family (namely mothers and sisters) had chosen to work within education. Of the six participants, five were children when their mothers worked within these roles; during their childhood, Participants 3 and 4 both attended the settings run by their mothers.

Of the six participants, three directly referred to the influence their parents had had on their early career aspirations. Specifically, when asked about early career aspirations, Participant 2 commented 'I suppose you look at your parents and say 'well I'm going to do something like that''. Of the six participants, five directly referred to an interest (or subject specialism) in languages and/or English as a subject at secondary school. In addition to this, all participants appeared to share an interest in subjects that were associated with creativity. Of the six participants, four referred to opportunities for work experience within education. However out of the four, only one participant directly referred to opportunities for work experience offered by their secondary school. Instead participants spoke of their own networks and connections that led to opportunities to experience ECEC.

Practices

In order to determine initial practices within ECEC, questions adjusted to focus on participants' entrance into the field of education. Of the six participants, two entered a career within education (in the form of paid work) as their first job. In contrast, the remaining participants entered the field of education later on in their career trajectories. Participants had a range of job titles (see Table 1) and multiple responsibilities. Of the six participants, four intended to remain either within their current role or within the field of ECEC. For example, when asked about his future career intentions, Participant 5 replied 'I won't go anywhere else, there is too much I am still interested in'. The two remaining participants revealed concerns regarding the wider issues relating to ECEC as potential reasons for resigning from their current job role. For example, Participant 1 commented 'there is a lot of uncertainty going on around Children's Centres at the moment and future careers so I am in the process of looking at other options'. Meanwhile, Participant 3 referred to his current interest in alternative career options 'I'm not sure if it's something that is able to get the most out of me...it takes what I'm good at and uses that but doesn't then stretch it on'.

Values and Beliefs

Discussions with participants regarding their entrance into ECEC and current roles and responsibilities uncovered their motivation to work with young children. For example, Participant 2 referred to his own personal experiences as a father as motivation for working with young children. For Participant 3, his identity as a Christian was central to his values and beliefs (and thus permeated into his day-to-day work with children). When asked about his motivation to work in ECEC, Participant 4 commented 'for them even just to say my name gives me a really warm glow...it's my life really'. Similarly, Participant 5 replied 'the love of my life became my life'.

The focus of the interview turned to participants' beliefs about the reasons why men remain under-represented within the field. Of the six participants, all directly referred to the stigma attached to men working with young children and subsequent reactions to their career choice and three directly referred to stereotyping of men who choose to work with young children. Participant 5 shared his own experience of dealing with stigma 'at my infant school, I actually said to the staff every time I comfort a child, every time I am saying well done to a child I risk my job'. Furthermore, he commented that the stigma attached to men working in ECEC was 'fanned by wretched newspapers'. All six participants referred to practical issues (specifically workforce conditions) that they believed currently deter men from working in ECEC. Of the six participants, three referred to the low status of ECEC work as a potential deterrent to men considering a career in ECEC. For example, Participant 3 commented 'it is never going to be a career'. Participants were asked to consider the benefits of increasing the number of men in the workforce. A total of four participants referred to the potential for men to offer something different to women in their work with children. A total of four participants also referred to the opportunity for male professionals to play a particular role within ECEC settings specifically due to their sex. For example, Participant 5 stated 'children are less likely to get a consistent male in their lives so their

image of what a father, man is, is a long way away from my image when I was a child'.

Finally, participants were asked to consider strategies to increase the number of men in ECEC. Interestingly, participants each discussed different strategies and approaches to increasing the number of men in ECEC. For example, Participant 1 felt that a clear development pathway for practitioners would encourage men to enter the workforce, whilst Participant 2 identified the need to influence culture and change attitudes within society (and inside the ECEC sector itself).

Discussion

When referring to their own childhood, all participants referred to female relatives (mothers and/or sisters) who have worked within education. The findings indicate that in this instance, the role of their female relatives within education has provided participants with an insight into the field at an early age. Thus, it would appear that the very nature of the habitus (specifically, the tendency for women to enter the workforce) also offers a way to challenge it. This reflects the fluid nature of the habitus. As Navarro (2006:16) suggested, the habitus is 'not fixed or permanent'. However, a lack of research into the experiences of men who work with young children ensures that our understanding of why men *do* work in ECEC remains limited. Thus, opportunities to foster early interests in ECEC are missed. This is also evident from the lack of opportunities for work experience in ECEC during secondary school; early experiences within ECEC settings were provided due to participants' own connections and networks. This highlights the missed opportunities for individuals interested in ECEC who are unable to access associated networks. Furthermore, respondents entered the workforce at any stage within their career trajectory (see Table 1); for some, this may be their first experience of work, for others the decision to enter ECEC may occur as a result of a career change. However, current suggestions for promotion of ECEC to men (such as those offered within the Nutbrown Review, 2012 and also the Tickell Review, 2011) do not account for the multi-level approach required to target men who have an interest in ECEC work at different stages within their career trajectories.

Participants referred to a variety of job roles and responsibilities thus displaying varying levels of seniority. Once again, this reflects the need to focus promotion of ECEC work to men not only at various stages within their career trajectory, but also to promote the diverse experiences of male practitioners in order to account for the specific areas of ECEC that they have an interest in. This highlights the valuable role of careers advisors and school careers events in providing students (who are at the beginning of their career trajectories) with detailed and informative guidance regarding the different roles and associated responsibilities available within the field of ECEC. Furthermore, men who are interested in ECEC work as a career change also require targeted guidance that provides them with the chance to explore the full range of career opportunities available to them. As well as support and guidance for those interested in the ECEC, equally important is the retention of men currently working within the field; this is particularly interesting to

consider in light of concern regarding the high levels of staff turnover in ECEC work (Rolfe, 2005; Osgood 2012). Whilst four participants intended to stay within their current role or within ECEC, two referred to their intention to consider alternative career options due to job uncertainty and lack of career progression. This echoes Nutbrown's (2012) concern regarding the lack of proper career progression for members of the ECEC workforce. Moreover, participants referred to concerns regarding the low status associated with ECEC work; this is a concern shared by Tickell (2011), Nutbrown (2012) and DfE (2013). Wider workforce conditions such as this have the potential to deter men from entering the workforce however, also have further implications for retention. Furthermore, there is a tendency to focus on the conditions required to encourage individuals to enter the workforce, however investigation into the retention of (the limited number of) men in ECEC is missing.

In addition to a lack of investigation into retention of male practitioners, their motivation for working with young children also goes unreported. Participants referred to the positive experiences had within their current role and the potential to impact the lives of young children, thus reflecting the value of their work within ECEC. Interestingly, all participants referred to concern regarding the stigma associated with men working with young children, which they felt was further exacerbated by the media. Therefore, it would appear that publicity surrounding men in ECEC presents an unbalanced view of their work and does not account for the positive examples of men in ECEC and the impact they have on the children and families they work with. This highlights the importance of sharing (and publicising) positive experiences had by a variety of male practitioners, for example to school pupils who are in the early stages of forming initial career choices.

Until greater recognition of the positive work done here is reported and research conducted to examine the reasons why men *do* work in ECEC; this topic is unlikely to receive the attention that it deserves.

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